Three Dimensions of Buddhist Studies

B. Alan Wallace

Published in

Buddhist Theology: Critical Reflections of Contemporary Buddhist Scholars, John Makransky & Roger Jackson, eds., pp. 61-77. London: Curzon Press. 1999.

THE QUESTION OF TERMINOLOGY

In these early discussions of the relation between purely academic approaches to the study of Buddhism and Buddhist approaches, we immediately confront the question: What do we call the Buddhist approach? Following the lead of confessional scholars in the religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, we may call this approach *theological*, but this immediately raises qualms on the part of many Buddhist scholars who contend that the term *theological* is simply inappropriate within the context of Buddhist studies. One might defend the use of this term on the grounds that even Theravāda Buddhism acknowledges the existence of a host of gods, including Indra and Brahmā, regarding them as lofty beings within *saṃsāra*, while a Buddha is viewed as superior to all other humans and gods. Clearly Theravāda Buddhism is not non-theistic in the sense of denying the existence of gods altogether, but it is not theistic in the sense of deifying the Buddha or anyone else in any way comparable to the God of Moses or of Jesus.

Within Mahāyāna Buddhism, on the other hand, many treatises assert the existence of the Dharmakāya as an omnipresent, omniscient, omni-benevolent consciousness, which takes on a myriad of forms to which Mahāyāna Buddhists offer devotions, supplicatory prayers, and worship, much as in Near-Eastern

theistic religions. Further, proponents of Atiyoga and other Vajrayāna doctrines affirm the existence of the Primordial Buddha, Samantabhadra, as the ground and origin of the whole of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*; and they view all phenomena as creative expressions of Samantabhadra, whose nature is none other than the Dharmakāya, which, in turn, is nondual from the primordial awareness of every sentient being.[1] Within these contexts, the term *theology* appears more and more applicable to Buddhism, despite the real and important differences between the theologies of the Near-Eastern religions and Buddhism.

Applying the term *Buddhist theology* to the Buddhist study of Buddhism may be more effectively criticized on the very different grounds that it is too narrow a term; for the Buddhist canon includes treatises on many topics that fall outside the scope of theology, including logic, epistemology, ontology, social and cognitive psychology, physiology, physics, cosmology, and medicine. This is not to say that the Buddhist tradition addresses these topics in the same ways that they are studied in the modern world, but it does raise many of the same issues commonly addressed in the corresponding contemporary fields of study.

This raises the larger question as to whether the very inclusion of the totality of Buddhism within the Euro-American category of *religion* is itself an act of ideological hegemony. To use a common analytical tool of Buddhist logic, I would suggest that there is in fact a "four-point relation" between Buddhism and religion, which entails the existence of instances of (1) both Buddhism and religion, (2) Buddhism but not religion, (3) religion but not Buddhism, and (4) neither.[2] The following are instances of those four categories:

---

[1]For the Atiyoga, or rDzogs chen, account of the nature of Samantabhadra see Longchen Rabjam and also the chapter "The Primordial Purity of the Universe" in Jamgön Kongtrul Lodrö Tayé.

[2]If there were a three-point relation between Buddhism and religion, there would have to be (1) an instance of something that is both, (4) an instance of something that is neither, and instances of the above category (2) or (3) but not both. Another logical option is that instances of Buddhism and religion might be

1. The Buddhist abstention from killing on the grounds that such an act karmically leads to miserable rebirths and obstructs one's progress towards liberation is an instance of both Buddhism and religion. Buddhists commonly acknowledge that such abstention from killing on ethical grounds is an instance of Buddhist practice and therefore of Buddhism itself, so this is not contested. Moreover, few would deny that this is an instance of religious practice and therefore of religion. Professor Van Harvey, for instance, observes that in deeming something religious we ordinarily mean a perspective expressing a dominating interest in certain universal and elemental features of human existence as those features bear on the human desire for liberation and authentic existence.[3] By that criterion, the Buddhist perspective on the virtue of non-violence may clearly be deemed religious.

2. The instructions on diagnosing physical disorders presented in the *Four Medical Tantras* (Tib., *rGyud bzhi*), which provide the textual basis for the whole of the Tibetan Buddhist medical tradition, may be cited as an instance of Buddhist teachings, for, according to Tibetan Buddhist tradition, they are attributed, to the Buddha himself (Clark: 10).[4] Insofar as health maintenance is viewed by Buddhists simply as a means to assist them in their pursuit of favorable rebirth and liberation, then even these teachings may be deemed religious. The same may be said of the many Buddhist writings on logic, epistemology and other topics that are not commonly deemed *religious*. To that extent, all Buddhist theories and practices may indeed be regarded as religious, in which case there is only a three-point relation between Buddhism and religion. But insofar as topics such as Buddhist medicine, logic, epistemology, and

---

mutually exclusive, and a final option is that the sets of instances of the two might be mutually inclusive.

[3]Harvey: Ch. 8.

[4]For a detailed account of medical writings and practice in early Theravāda Buddhism see Zysk.

psychology are viewed in their own right, irrespective of their relevance to favorable rebirth and liberation, they may be classified as instances of Buddhism, but not religion.

3. The ancient Hebrew practice of sacrificing animals to God is an instance of religious practice (according to the above criterion), but is not an instance of Buddhist practice.

4. Quantum mechanics is neither religion nor Buddhism. Generally speaking, quantum mechanics is concerned with the nature of the smallest units of mass and energy, which has no obvious bearing on the universal and elemental features of human existence as those features bear on the human desire for liberation and authentic existence. Moreover, the principles of quantum mechanics are nowhere found in any Buddhist texts, so that science would appear to be neither a religion nor a science. This is not to deny the fact that there are theoretical conclusions drawn by quantum physicists that bear resemblances to some assertions within Buddhist doctrine.[5]

On the other hand, in the recent past, there have been several writers, most notably physicist Fritjof Capra, who claim that the deepest truths of quantum mechanics are identical to the deepest truths of various mystical traditions, including Buddhism (Capra). In a similar vein, physicist Paul Davies has written a number of popular books declaring that a new religion is emerging from modern physics (Davies). This is not a late twentieth-century innovation. During the Scientific Revolution, many eminent scientists, such as Robert Boyle, regarded scientific inquiry as a form of worship performed by scientists in the temple of nature. Nor is this notion confined to natural scientists. In the late nineteenth century, Emile Durkheim claimed that science pursues the same end as religion, and it is better fitted to perform the task. In his view, scientific

---

[5]As as an example, note the comment by Louis de Broglie cited in Wallace, 1996: 130.

thought, which he maintained is "only a more perfect form of religious thought," (1915/1965: 477) properly supplants the cognitive authority of religion altogether. Thus, for some people science in general and quantum mechanics in particular may indeed be instances of religion, but I would still maintain that quantum mechanics as such is not a religion, Buddhist or otherwise.

If there is in fact a four-point relation between Buddhism and religion, it is incorrect to classify Buddhism simply as a religion. If it were legitimate to deem it a religion since it bears much in common with other religions, it would be equally legitimate to classify it as a philosophy, a holistic medical system, and as a psychology. Buddhism is not simply a religion, so the Buddhist study of this tradition is not simply theological. It can quite rightly be claimed that medieval Christianity, prior to the Scientific Revolution and the secularization of institutions of higher learning, was also not simply a religion in the modern sense of the term; for it, too, incorporated many elements, particularly from non-Christian, Greek sources, that are not strictly religious in nature. However, a significant difference remains between Buddhism and medieval Christianity: while Buddhism includes many theories and methods of philosophy, psychology, and medicine, and so on within its accepted canons of teachings attributed to the Buddha, medieval Christianity added such theories from outside, non-Jewish and non-Christian sources. While the Bible is paradigmatically a religious treatise, the Buddhist canons do not lend themselves to such a straightforward classification.

Dharmology is another term that has been proposed to denote Buddhist approaches to studying the theories and practices of Buddhism. Buddhism, however, is not equivalent to Dharma, for Buddhist texts commonly refer to non-Buddhist Dharmas, or religious doctrines. Moreover, in a broader sense, *dharmas* include mundane concerns (*lokadharma*) and most broadly speaking, all

phenomena. Thus, *dharmalogy* is far too encompassing a term to use for a specific approach to Buddhist studies. And yet from another perspective, this use of *dharmology* is too limited, for it indicates the study of Dharma, as opposed to the study of the Buddha and the Saṅgha.

In this essay I would like to move away from the terms *Buddhist theology* and *dharmology* and propose that there are not only two but three approaches, or dimensions, to the study of Buddhism. These correspond to the orientations of the Buddhologist, the Buddhist theorist, and the Buddhist practitioner.

THE BUDDHOLOGIST

The modern scholarly study of Buddhism commonly known as Buddhology may be defined as the objective, scientific study of the various manifestations of the Buddhist tradition, including its texts, doctrines, uses of language, ways of reasoning, rituals, beliefs, practices, biographies, historical developments, and cultural contexts. Thus, the academic community of Buddhologists includes philosophers, historians, anthropologists, sociologists, and philologists who have chosen Buddhism as their field of study. In adopting the ideal of objectivity, Buddhologists align themselves with a central principle of the most dominant method of acquiring knowledge in the modern world, namely the "scientific method," which provides Buddhology with the same authority as the other social sciences within the academy.

One aspect of this principle of objectivity is that one's assertions must be epistemically objective, i.e., observer independent, implying that they are equally accessible to all "competent observers." In its most defensible guise, this ideal demands that researchers strive to be as free as possible of personal bias and prejudice in their collection and interpretation of information. In its least

defensible form, it demands that objective knowledge must not involve any subjective aims or purposes, an ideal that has never been achieved by any of the sciences. We all have working assumptions and priorities that inevitably influence what we study and how we study it.

Within the scientific tradition, objectivism has a much deeper connotation than freedom from subjective bias. Scientific objectivism can be traced back to the attempt on the part of the pioneers of the Scientific Revolution to view reality from a vantage point that transcended the limitations of human subjectivity. From its inception, modern science was after a "God's-eye view" of the physical universe, entailing a total objectification of the natural world, and, implicitly, the exclusion of subjective contamination from the pursuit of scientific knowledge. This ideal has so captured the modern mind that scientific knowledge is now often simply equated with objective knowledge.

In the secularization of the modern world, there has been a shift in ideal from a God's-eye-view to the "view from nowhere," (Nagel) that is, a perspective that is totally free of subjective contamination, not localized in any particular time or place, but with no pretense of divine transcendence. Much modern Buddhological literature appears to adopt this ideal by studying Buddhism as if the researchers themselves were detached, disembodied, timeless, impartial observers of the phenomena of Buddhism. This ideal might be called the "Arhat's view" of Buddhism, that is, the disengaged view of someone who has already "crossed over to the other shore" and regards the raft of Buddhism from a distance. This actual accomplishment of this ideal, however, is highly suspect, for researchers in any field bring with them their own assumptions, questions, and goals that are invariably tied into their own culture. It is therefore misleading to suggest that a non-religious perspective is somehow intrinsically less biased or more objective than a religious one.

For modern Buddhologists, the culture in which we live is dominated by the metaphysical principles of scientific naturalism, including physicalism, reductionism, monism, and the "closure principle," which states that only physical processes act as causes in the physical universe. While modern science, guided by those principles, continues to make great strides in understanding the objective, physical world, its scientific inquiry into the nature of the human mind is a relatively new and primitive discipline. And when it comes to understanding the origins, nature, causal efficacy, and fate of consciousness, science has left us in total ignorance, concealed at times by a smoke screen of assumptions and speculations (Güzeldere). In short, scientific naturalism provides useful guidelines for studying a wide array of objective phenomena, but those very guidelines hamper the scientific study of subjective phenomena, which are not easily accessible to third-person observers. The reason for this is that the principle of objectivism, in the sense of the demand for observer independence, simply cannot accommodate the study of subjective phenomena, for it directs one's attention only to those objects that exist independently of one's own subjective awareness. This principle encourages scientists to pursue their research as if they, as human subjects, do not exist. It is no wonder then that science presents us with a view of a world in which our own subjective existence is not acknowledged, and the notion of the meaning of our existence cannot even be raised.[6]

Buddhologists who adopt this "objective" approach tend to focus only on the external "surfaces" of the Buddhist tradition—its texts, external rituals and so forth—without penetrating through to their underlying, subjective experiences of practicing Buddhists. Thus, even Buddhological texts purporting to study Buddhist meditation may deal only with Buddhist literature on meditation,

[6]I discuss the principles of scientific naturalism and its relation to religion and the study of the mind in Wallace, 1998.

without ever questioning whether or not Buddhists have ever actually had any of the experiences recounted in their texts. Much that goes under the rubric of *the scientific study of Buddhism* actually bears a closer parallel to medieval scholasticism than it does to any modern empirical science. For such scholars, the arrival of Buddhist texts in modern university libraries constitutes, for all practical purposes, the arrival of Buddhism in the West (Almond).

The secular, academic discipline of religious studies may insist on purely naturalistic causes of religion, whereas theology acknowledges divine influences on the origination and development of a religious tradition. But this distinction between natural and supernatural origins of religion does not readily pertain to Buddhism, for even paranormal abilities and extrasensory perception are considered by Buddhists to be *natural*. Moreover, the notion that religion as such deals with the sacred, while science deals with the profane also does not hold for Buddhism; for Buddhist theories and practices are concerned with both ultimate and relative, sacred and profane, truths. Buddhologists may simply not comment on whether or not there are culturally transcendent influences on the origins and development of the Buddhist tradition. However, by ignoring the experiential component of the origins and development of Buddhist theories and practices and by attending solely to the outer expressions of those events, one may profoundly misconstrue the actual nature of the field of one's research, resulting in a biased and distorted study of Buddhism. Thus, by adhering to the principle of epistemic objectivism, the very scope of Buddhist studies becomes seriously limited.

The Buddhological de-emphasis on Buddhist experience conforms to the objectivist orientation of scientific naturalism, but it is a far cry from the provocative perspective of William James' *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, which is more often read than emulated by contemporary scholars of religion.

James' treatment of Buddhist meditative experience, although well-intentioned, was inadequate due to the limited materials available to him. But with the progress in Buddhist studies since his time, scholars are no longer constrained by those limitations.

The scope of Buddhology includes the origins of Buddhist doctrines and the biographies of prominent figures in the history of Buddhism. To understand these issues, the role of Buddhist experience, including extraordinary experiences (e.g., alleged conceptually unmediated experience, paranormal abilities, and various types of extrasensory perception) needs to be addressed. Buddhist tradition states that there are two types of Buddhadharma—the Dharma of the scriptures (*āgamadharma*) and the Dharma of realization (*adhigamadharma*). If Buddhology is to study the whole of the Buddhadharma, how are Buddhologists to investigate the Dharma of realization? They can certainly study the texts that discuss this topic, but those texts are further instances of the Dharma of the scriptures, not the Dharma of realization.

It is a truism in modern natural science that if one wants to *understand* physics, for example, one must *practice* physics. Simply reading physics textbooks. studying the history of physics, and studying the lives of physicists will never suffice. If one wishes to understand theoretical physics, one must know from experience what it means to engage in the practice of theoretical physics, even if only on a rudimentary level. Likewise, if one wishes to understand experimental physics, there is no substitute for spending time in the laboratory, training under the guidance of skilled research physicists. The same is true of the study of the Buddhist Dharma of realization: without personally engaging in Buddhist theorizing and practice, this domain of Buddhism will largely remain beyond one's reach.[7]

---

[7]I have discussed methodologies for studying Buddhist meditation in greater detail in the chapter "Methodological Perspectives" in Wallace,1997.

While Buddhological literature rarely deals with subjective Buddhist experience, it even more rarely questions whether or not the insights that are allegedly derived from Buddhist practice are valid.[8] This tendency is presumably due to the current popularity of cultural relativism and deconstructionism. Adhering to such an approach, many Buddhologists side with Gadamer in giving up the claim to find in Buddhism any truth valid and intelligible for themselves. As Gadamer declares, "this acknowledgment of the otherness of the other, which makes him the object of objective knowledge, involves the fundamental suspension of his claim to truth." (1988: 270)[9] The obvious limitation of this deconstructive, relativistic treatment of texts, however, is that as soon as this hermeneutical criterion is applied to one's own writings, one's own texts are forced to abandon their claim to utter anything that is true. On the other hand, if advocates of this viewpoint claim a privileged perspective, superior to and unlike all others, they must stand at the end of a long line of earlier proponents of all manner of religious, philosophical, and scientific theories who make the same claim.

THE BUDDHIST THEORIST

While the domain of study for a Buddhologist is the Buddhist tradition, the domain of study for a Buddhist theorist includes all manner of phenomena as they are viewed in terms of Buddhist theories. While a Buddhologist may study Buddhist theories, a Buddhist theorist uses Buddhist concepts as a means to make the world as a whole intelligible. The English term *theory* stems from the Greek *theōria*, having the meaning of *beholding*, or *viewing*, much like the corresponding Sanskrit term *darśana*. Thus, Buddhist theorists may examine not only ancient Buddhist doctrines, but modern fields of knowledge, using Buddhist

[8]To take but a single example of this oversight, see Robert E. Buswell, Jr. & Robert M. Gimello, in which Buddhist paths to liberation and enlightenment are discussed in detail, while the question of the validity of Buddhist insights is rarely addressed.
[9]This statement is cited approvingly in Huntington: 13.

terminology, theories, and logic. For example, they may analyze the assumptions underlying modern scientific views of objectivity, including scientific naturalism and scientific realism, as well as other academic disciplines and social issues from a Buddhist perspective. The domain of study for the Buddhist theorist, therefore, is greater than the domain of study for the Buddhologist as such, for the former is concerned with the whole of reality, including Buddhism, while the latter focuses academically on Buddhism alone.

Between these two approaches there are also significant differences of perspective on the study of Buddhism itself: Buddhologists are intent on learning *about* Buddhism, whereas Buddhist theorists are intent on learning *from* Buddhism. The latter are therefore more prone to use Buddhist theories to examine many of their own preconceptions and assumptions, whereas Buddhologists tend to be more interested in critiquing the preconceptions and assumptions of the Buddhist tradition. Buddhist theorists may also ask such questions that might not occur to Buddhologists. For example, what bearing might the Madhyamaka view have on contemporary problems in the ontological foundations of modern physics? How might Buddhist theories of consciousness add to and themselves be enriched by dialogue with cognitive scientistific theories of mind? How do Buddhist views concerning the conceptually structured nature of experience compare with the insights of contemporary psychology?

One might suggest that one important difference between these two approaches is that Buddhologists try to adopt an objective, unbiased, and detached perspective for their study of Buddhism, while that ideal of objectivity is unattainable for Buddhist theorists since they are personally committed to a Buddhist viewpoint. This judgment is supported by the fact that scholarship by Buddhist theorists often does appear to bear a strong subjective bias.

Nevertheless, the ideals of intellectual detachment, lack of prejudice, and not grasping onto views are certainly central themes of much of Buddhist philosophy; so Buddhist theorists who succumb to personal prejudice are simultaneously failing to live up to the ideals of their own tradition as well as that of modern Buddhology. On the other hand, Buddhologists who critique Buddhist assumptions without ever critically examining their own preconceptions equally fall short of the mark of true objectivity. The fact that one scholar views Buddhism from a Buddhist perspective and another views it from a modern Western perspective does not, in itself, imply that either one is more objective or rational than the other.

Using once again the previous mode of Buddhist analysis, I maintain that there is a four-point relation between Buddhologists and Buddhist theorists, which entails the existence of instances of individuals who act as (1) both a Buddhologist and a Buddhist theorist, (2) a Buddhologist but not a Buddhist theorist, (3) a Buddhist theorist but not a Buddhologist, and (4) neither a Buddhologist nor a Buddhist theorist. Rather than citing individuals by name as instances of these categories, I shall describe types of individuals.

1. A Buddhologist who is not a Buddhist may, nevertheless, at least temporarily adopt a Buddhist perspective for analyzing some aspect of the Buddhist tradition, in which case such a person would take on the role of a Buddhologist as well as a Buddhist theorist. Likewise, a Buddhist theorist may engage in the objective, scientific study of the various manifestations of the Buddhist tradition without necessarily discarding a Buddhist perspective. For the mere use of Buddhist concepts in itself is no less objective than using other concepts familiar to modern, Western, secular scholarship. In that case, such a person would also be acting both as a Buddhist theorist and a Buddhologist.

2. A Buddhologist whose own views are incompatible with those of Buddhism and who has no interest in viewing Buddhism from anything but a non-Buddhist perspective would be an instance of someone who is a Buddhologist but not a Buddhist theorist.

3. A Buddhist theorist who is personally committed to the views of some Buddhist tradition, to the extent that he or she cannot conceive of viewing that tradition from a detached, unbiased perspective, is a Buddhist theorist but not a Buddhologist.

4. A scholar of Buddhism who is personally committed to a non-Buddhist perspective, to the extent that he or she cannot conceive of viewing that perspective from a detached, unbiased perspective, is neither a Buddhologist nor a Buddhist theorist.

If there is in fact a four-point relation between a Buddhologist and a Buddhist theorist, then both styles of scholarship should be equally welcome to the halls of modern academia. Among the four instances cited above, only the third and fourth have no legitimate place in an institution dedicated to a liberal arts education.

THE BUDDHIST PRACTITIONER

While the Buddhist theorist *views* reality in terms of Buddhist concepts, terminology, and ways of reasoning, the Buddhist practitioner *implements* Buddhist practices, such as the three trainings in ethics, meditative stabilization, and wisdom or the cultivation of the six perfections characterizing the Bodhisattva way of life. Like the relation between a theoretical physicist and an experimentalist, a Buddhist theorist is concerned with the theoretical aspects of Buddhism, whereas the practitioner is concerned with its practical applications.

The ideal in many Buddhist traditions is to be both an accomplished scholar and practitioner of Buddhism. The Tibetan Buddhist tradition, for example, comments that one who meditates without having studied is like a blind man, while one who studies but does not practice is like a cripple. Nevertheless, most people within the tradition seem to emphasize one of these ideals more than the other.

While a Buddhist theorist may know only *about* the experiences that occur as a result of meditation and the like, on the basis of other people's accounts, the accomplished Buddhist practitioner comes to know the experiences themselves. Likewise, a theoretical physicist may have a fine conceptual grasp of the techniques used in a certain type of research and its results, but only those who have conducted experimental research themselves know what it is actually like to carry a research project through to the end. For the theorist, such research is something that is learned about in journals, whereas for the experimentalist, it is learned in the laboratory or the field. The Buddhist practitioner may also raise a number of questions posed by neither a Buddhologist or a Buddhist theorist. For example, are compassion and empathy qualities that can be cultivated by means of meditation? If so, can Buddhist ideas and methods be used effectively to that end in our society? If so, do the traditional techniques need to be altered to make them more effective in the modern world? A Buddhist practitioner may also address many other contemporary issues pertaining to conflict resolution, the dying process, and mental health, including dealing effectively with anger, depression, anxiety, stress, and attentional disorders.

Among the wide range of Buddhist practices, including meditation, only a small fraction of their resultant experiences are said to be generally ineffable. Many other experiences such as insight into impermanence, the realization of meditative quiescence (*śamatha*), and the experience of compassion, are not

deemed inconceivable or inexpressible. Yet, it may be impossible to convey even such experiences effectively to someone who has never had them.

Following the type of analysis used previously, the relation between a Buddhist theorist and a Buddhist practitioner is a complex one. Since Buddhist tradition regards the very act of Buddhist theorizing as a form of Buddhist practice, a Buddhist theorist would therefore necessarily be a Buddhist practitioner. However, a distinction still needs to be made between *practicing* (Tib. *nyams su len pa*) and *putting into practice* (Tib. *lag len bstar ba*). For example, a Buddhist theorist who never practices meditation may study treatises on meditation, and that in itself is a type of Buddhist practice. But it is profoundly different from putting those meditation instructions into practice and witnessing for oneself the effects of the training. In terms of meditation, therefore, such a person would rightly be classified principally as a theorist and not as a practitioner. On the other hand, someone who practices simple forms of Buddhist meditation, such as the cultivation of mindfulness of breathing and mindfulness of walking, but who has little knowledge of the theoretical significance of such practices within the context of Buddhism may become an adept Buddhist practitioner, but would not be regarded as an accomplished Buddhist theorist.

Is it possible for Buddhist theorists and practitioners ever to step back from their Buddhist views and practices and examine them from an objective, scholarly perspective? In proposing his methodology for studying meditation scientifically, Professor Frits Staal draws a strict distinction between (1) followers of a *guru*, adherents of a particular sect, or people in search of *nirvāna, mokṣa,* or salvation and (2) genuine students of mysticism; and he maintains that the latter must sooner or later resume a critical outlook so that they can obtain understanding and make it available to others (1975: 130). The student of meditation, he proposes, can learn the necessary techniques

of meditation only by initially accepting them uncritically. This assertion runs counter to the Buddhist threefold education in hearing, thinking, and meditation, which I have discussed in the essay "The Dialectic Between Religious Belief and Contemplative Knowledge in Tibetan Buddhism," also included in this volume. Thus, Professor Staal's assertion that the critical student must "be prepared to question and check what the teacher says, and introduce new variables and experimental variation" (1975: 146) is important for responsible Buddhist practitioners as well. He suggests that even the scientific study of meditation requires that one first suspend doubt in order to engage in meditative practice, then later on resort to analysis and critical evaluation. Without such subsequent reflection, the student of meditation will be like a sleep-walker who gains no knowledge or understanding (1975: 134). But according to the Buddhist sequence of hearing, thinking, and meditation, analysis and critical evaluation must both precede and follow the practice of meditation. Thus, Professor Staal's claims not withstanding, (1975: 63 & 148) there appears to be no justifiable reason why Buddhist practitioners in general must be less capable than Buddhologists of evolving meaningful theories about Buddhist meditation or of evaluating whether practitioners have actually attained the goals they think they have.

THE BUDDHIST

While the Buddhist tradition presents various criteria for determining who is and is not a Buddhist, it is often said that someone who takes refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Saṅgha is a Buddhist. The relation between Buddhist theorists and practitioners, on the one hand, and the Buddhist community as a whole may be likened to the relation between scientists and that segment of the general population that accepts the assertions of scientists largely on the basis of the authority of the scientific tradition, as opposed to their own ability to

demonstrate either compelling empirical evidence or rational arguments validating those assertions. A Buddhist may or may not be a Buddhologist, a Buddhist theorist, or even a Buddhist practitioner, apart from the fact that taking refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Saṅgha is itself a Buddhist practice.

Must one be a Buddhist in order to adopt a Buddhist theory or engage in Buddhist practice? Clearly there are many people nowadays who accept certain aspects of the Buddhist world view or practice Buddhist meditations without considering themselves to be Buddhist and without taking Buddhist refuge. To adopt Buddhist theories or engage in Buddhist practices, must one know that those theories or practices are found in Buddhism? In other words, might the views and practices of adherents of other religions or contemplative traditions coincide with certain Buddhist views and practices? The Buddhist theorist and practitioner D. T. Suzuki, for example, claimed that Meister Eckhart's way of thinking was generally close to that of Zen Buddhism and specifically that his notion of the Godhead as "pure nothingness" was in perfect accord with the Buddhist doctrine of *śūnyatā* (1957: 3 & 16). The Christian theorist and practitioner Thomas Merton seems to concur when he declared, "whatever Zen may be, however you define it, it is somehow there in Eckhart" (1968: 13).

Steven Katz, on the other hand, who, I assume, is neither a Buddhist nor a Christian theorist or practitioner, denies such claims, emphasizing that Eckhart was medieval Catholic Dominican monk and not a Mahāyāna Buddhist (1983: 39, 57, & fn. 91). Katz is certainly correct in maintaining that there were no medieval Catholic Dominican monks who were also Mahāyāna Buddhists. But this fact does not preclude the possibility that Eckhart may have gained certain contemplative experiences and insights that closely resemble those sought through the practice of Zen.

My own predilection in this regard is to rely more heavily on the authority of individuals who have deeply immersed themselves in Christian and Buddhist theory and practice than on those who know of both only on the basis of what they have read. As an analogy, to evaluate two independent, dissimilar scientific research methodologies and the theoretical conclusions drawn from such research, I believe that the theoretical and experimental scientists actually engaged in such research would generally be a more reliable source of information about the relation between their work than a philosopher, historian, or sociologist of science who knows about it only from their reports. Moreover, if two such methodologies produce similar empirical data, many scientists conclude that those methodologies were detecting a physical reality that is independent of both modes of research. A similar line of reasoning, of course, is often expressed by those who assert the presence of a "perennial philosophy" running through the great mystical traditions of the world.

In his essay included in this volume, Professor John Makransky points out that the contemporary Buddhist tradition has taken relatively little interest in the writings of Buddhologists. Likewise, relatively few practicing scientists take much interest in the writings of philosophers of science, and some dismiss such scholarship as being irrelevant to scientific research.[10] Philosophers, they claim, only spin webs of speculation about the nature of scientific research and knowledge, without having any inside knowledge as to what it is like to actually *practice* science. Similarly, practicing Buddhists sometimes complain that Buddhologists commonly overlook the experiential aspects of Buddhism, including the practical applications of Buddhist ideas and methods, thereby ignoring the elements that are of greatest interest to them and brought them to Buddhist practice in the first place.

---

[10]As an example of this dismissive attitude toward the philosophy of science, see Feynman.

I believe that the dismissive attitudes of Buddhologists and Buddhist practitioners for each other is a disservice to both communities, much as the lack of appreciation of philosophy on the part of many scientists causes them to be philosophically ignorant and naive. Buddhists theorists and practitioners have much to learn from the scholarly methods of modern Buddhology. For example, the modern historical study of Buddhism might help Buddhists by demonstrating the adaptability of their own tradition as it has transformed from one culture and historical era to another. Such knowledge could help Buddhists maintain the vitality of their tradition in today's world, rather than adhering dogmatically to the forms Buddhism developed in other cultures and historical eras. Buddhologists, likewise, would have little to study were it not for the records left behind from earlier generations of Buddhist theorists and practitioners, and their scholarship may continue to benefit from the work of the present generation as well.

THE INTERDISCIPLINARY NATURE OF BUDDHISM

Since modern Buddhology strives to emulate the intellectual rigor and objectivity of the natural sciences, it is pertinent that part of the great strength of the natural sciences is that researchers from different fields frequently collaborate both in terms of their empirical methodologies and their theoretical analyses in their respective fields. We are now at a point in history at which there is rapidly increasing interest on the part of many researchers in the physical sciences, medicine, and cognitive sciences in the theories and practices of Buddhism. Much of their interest concerns the causes, nature, and effects of the phenomena of meditative experience—precisely the topics often overlooked by Buddhologists, and most strongly emphasized by Buddhist theorists and practitioners. I personally have encountered considerable interest in Buddhist

techniques for training the attention, exploring the nature of the dream state, techniques for controlling one's own mind, for cultivating compassion and empathy, for relieving stress, for investigating the nature of consciousness, and for curing various physical diseases by means of Tibetan Buddhist medicine. Such collaboration provides an opportunity for Buddhologists, Buddhist theorists, and Buddhist practitioners to work together with research scientists to develop new methodologies and advance our knowledge in ways previously unimagined by any of them on their own.

In a similar vein, William James proposed a science of religion that is chiefly concerned with a scrutiny of "the immediate content of religious consciousness." (1902/1982: 12) This approach was to be empirical, rather than rationalistic, focusing on religious experience rather than religious doctrines and institutions. Such a science, he suggested, might offer a bridge of understanding among peoples with disparate world views and bring a greater degree of coherence and intelligibility to different ways of exploring and understanding human existence (1902/1982: 456). Perhaps the time has come when this noble challenge, proposed almost a century ago, may be taken to heart.

REFERENCES

Almond, Philip C. *The British Discovery of Buddhism*. Cambridge:
1988 Cambridge University Press.

Buswell, Robert E. Jr. and Gimello, Robert, M., eds. *Paths to Liberation: The Mārga and its Transformations in Buddhist Thought*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
1992

Clark, Barry, tr. *The Quintessence Tantras of Tibetan Medicine.* Ithaca: Snow
1995 Lion Publications.

Capra, Fritjof *The Tao of Physics*. Boulder: Shambhala.
1975

Davies, Paul *The Mind of God*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
1992

Durkheim, Emile *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life,* Joseph W.
1915/1965 Swain., trans. New York: Macmillan.

Feynman, Richard *The Character of Physical Law*. Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press.
1983

Gadamer, H. *Truth and Method*. Garrett Barden & John Cumming, trans.
1988 New York. Reprint.

Güzeldere, Güven "Consciousness: What It Is, How to Study It, What to
1995 Learn from Its History." *Journal of Consciousness Studies: controversies in science & the humanities*, **II**, No. 1, 1995. pp.
30-51.

Harvey, Van *The Historian and the Believer*. Philadelphia: Westeminster
1981 Press.

Huntington, C. W. 1989 *The Emptiness of Emptiness: An Introduction to Early Indian Mādhyamika*. with Geshé Namgyal Wangchen. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

James, William 1902/1982 *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*. New York: Penguin Books.

Jamgön Kongtrul Lodrö Tayé 1995 *Myriad Worlds: Buddhist Cosmology in Abhidharma, Kālacakra and Dzog-chen*. Trans. International Translation Committee of Kunkhyab Chöling. Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications.

Katz, Steven T., ed. 1983 *Mysticism and Religious Traditions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Longchen Rabjam 1996 *The Practice of Dzogchen*. Tulku Thondup, trans. Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications.

Merton, Thomas 1968 *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*. New York: New Directions.

Nagel, Thomas 1986 *The View from Nowhere*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Staal, Frits 1975 *Exploring Mysticism: A Methodological Essay*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Suzuki, D. T. 1957 *Mysticism: Christian and Buddhist*. New York: Harper.

Wallace, B. Alan 1996 *Choosing Reality: A Buddhist View of Physics and the Mind.* Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications.

Wallace, B. Alan 1997 *The Bridge of Quiescence: Experiencing Tibetan Buddhist Meditation*. Chicago: Open Court Press.

Wallace, B. Alan 1998 *The Taboo of Subjectivity: A Contemplative View of Scientific Naturalism and the Mind*. New York: Oxford Universtiy Press.

Zysk, Kenneth G. 1991 *Asceticism and Healing in Ancient India: Medicine in the Buddhist Monastery*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.